

FEAST FIT FOR A KING . . . OF SHARKS

The migration of humpback whales along our coast attracts growing numbers of whale watchers every year, as the playful whales engage in spectacular behaviour in the waters close to Perth. Last September, however, the whale migration gave rise to a wildlife spectacle of the hair-raising kind.

Fishermen spotted a great white shark feasting on a dead humpback, north-west of Bathurst lighthouse at Rottnest Island. Great white sharks follow the annual humpback migration along our coast, targeting the old and the weak as possible meals.

CALM's vessel *Pseudorca II* was in the area monitoring humpback whales, and departmental officers went to investigate the shark and the possible risk it posed to people.

CALM alerted the water police and Perth radio to the presence of the whale carcass, as it was a potential navigation hazard. The department also informed Fisheries Western Australia of the presence of the great white shark.

"The shark was five metres long—about the size of a Holden Commodore—and was lunging at the carcass, tearing off large chunks. When *Pseudorca II* appeared, the shark also made several passes at the boat," said CALM wildlife officer Doug Coughran.

Doug captured this action and the shark's close investigation of the boat in a series of dramatic photos.

The shark treated the carcass as a floating banquet and spent the next few days following the dead whale, as it drifted closer

and closer to Perth's popular beaches. Fortunately the weather eventually carried the carcass well north of Perth and away from populated beaches.

A few days later, however, another humpback whale carcass did wash up on a Perth beach north of Pinnaroo Point, accompanied by a smaller and considerably less dangerous shark, although the species was not determined.

Such occurrences are likely to become more and more common along Western Australia's coast as humpback whales—driven almost to extinction by human hunters earlier this century—increase in number. Studies have estimated that the humpback population is increasing at up to 10 per cent a year, with some 6,000 whales now undertaking the yearly migration along WA's coast.

The great white was itself the target of human hunters in the past, and its numbers were thought to be in serious decline. It is now a protected species under WA's fisheries legislation and was recently listed as a threatened species under the Wildlife Conservation Act.

*Above right: The great white shark heads towards the boat to assess its edibility . . .*

*Centre right: . . . but decides to lunch off the dead humpback instead.*

*Right: With these teeth, lunch shouldn't take long.*

*Photos - Doug Coughran/CALM*



Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

# LANDSCOPE

VOLUME FIFTEEN NUMBER 3, AUTUMN 2000



One of the best selling books from CALM has recently been fully revised. See 'The Best of the South-West' on page 10.



A new weapon against the scourge of feral cats was recently tested on Hermite Island. See 'Isle of Cats' on page 18.



In the far north of WA, there is evidence of not one, but two cosmic impacts. See 'Cosmic Impacts in the Kimberley' on page 28.



Satellite imagery is helping us to fight maritime pollution. See 'Looking Through the Surface' on page 41.



A unique network links volunteer groups and regional herbaria with the CALM flora database. See 'Name That Plant' on page 35.

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## C O V E R

Western Australia is aptly described as the Wildflower State. Some 12,500 different species are known from the wild, with a huge range of colours, shapes and characters. But many species once found are lost again, and it's always an event when a species thought to be extinct is rediscovered. See 'Lost Jewels in the Bush' on page 23.



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 Colour Separation by Colourbox Digital  
 Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print  
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Published by  
 Department of Conservation and Land Management,  
 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia